

III. Applying It To The Congregation

When you have completed all the steps outlined in the last chapter you will know what the passage *meant* to the audience for which it was originally intended. Your next task is to find out what it *means* to your parish today. Merely to talk about what the sacred writer wanted to convey to his first readers is to engage in historical reconstruction. The word of God becomes living and active when it is understood in terms of its implications for contemporary Christians. The proclamation of the pericope has to be *applied* to lives of the people who hear you preach. The entire enterprise of preaching is predicated upon the assumption that there are analogies between the situation addressed by the biblical writer and situations in your parish today. It is by pointing out those analogies that you can illuminate the lives of your people with the light of the word. In order to do that, though, you have to study your parish. You have at least as big a task interpreting it as you had in interpreting the gospel passage appointed for Sunday. What follows are the steps through which you must go in order to perform that task.

1. *Analyze your audience.*

We sometimes act as though meaning were an absolute rather than a relative quality. "To mean," how-

ever, is a transitive verb. Words must mean *something to somebody*. In a similar way, we speak of certain things as significant, yet "to signify" has the root meaning of serving as a sign. What is significant, therefore, points somebody toward something. Thus a sermon cannot be addressed to the thin air with any assurance that something worth doing has been accomplished. An old evangelical term for a sermon was "the message," but messages have to be received by the persons to whom they were addressed and they have to be understood. Really to engage in preaching, then, means that we say something that we consider to be important to particular people, we say it to them, and we say it in such a way that they can understand it, will be interested in it, and, we pray, persuaded by it. For that to happen, we must know to whom we are speaking.

Even the smallest congregation incorporates representatives of a number of different groups. There are, for instance, persons of almost every age. Yet the preoccupations of young singles, for instance, are very different even from those of their own contemporaries who are married. The issues of life for young parents are by no means the same as those for their children, on the one hand, or their parents, on the other. Teenagers are different from kindergarteners and sociologists are even beginning to distinguish between the young-old (50-70) and the old-old (above seventy). Sermons that hold attention and that are helpful are preached by those aware of the range of concerns that occupies the various age groups that make up the congregation.

And, after admitting the validity of most that has been said recently about the danger of sexual stereotypes, it still must be recognized that some subjects will interest more of the men in the congregation than women, and vice versa. Marital status has already been alluded to as a factor in determining interests. Amount and kind of education is another. High school dropouts and Ph.D.'s do not usually have the same interests, nor, as far as that goes, do those with doctorates in botany and those with doctorates in English. Socio-economic groups, racial and ethnic representations, and, of course, those with more or less religious training, involvement, and experience will all need to be addressed in different ways.

Obviously, no homily can be written that will succeed in being equally meaningful to every member of the congregation, but the preacher should still remember that those who hear it will include all of these categories of persons and others. Perhaps the ideal is to aim for what is basically human, slant in the direction of a major constituency, and provide a few opportunities for others to be included along the way. And different mixes can be addressed on different Sundays. Yet at the beginning of every effort to figure out how that Sunday's gospel is to be applied to one's parish each week there should be a pause in which the diversity of its membership is recalled.

2. *Listen for resonances between Sunday's gospel and issues that have come up recently in conversations with parishioners.*

It has been said that clergy spend too much time answering questions that no one is asking. One reason for doing that is not knowing what questions they are asking. We cannot expect to preach effectively to people with whom we have no other communication. With the growing shortage of vocations not many priests have enough time for unstructured conversation with parishioners. After emergencies have been attended to, confessions heard, meetings attended, and liturgies performed little time is left over just to find out what is on people's minds.

Yet in precisely this hectic weekly round of duties there are numerous opportunities for discovering the issues that preoccupy parishioners, the things they think about when they lie awake at three o'clock in the morning. Since so many of the occasions on which they speak to us are times of anxiety and stress, what they say is much more likely to represent where their attention is really focused than their remarks on more formal or gracious occasions. Many Catholics have developed a surface affability as the way one speaks to priests that is at least as useful for the protection it gives them as for the deference and affection it indicates for those in holy orders. One only learns what they really think, what their true concerns are, when something causes the mask to slip momentarily.

Yet it is this genuine emotion with which the preacher must be in touch, not only in order to be able to speak about what people are interested in, but also in order to find the issues in their lives that

are as serious as those dealt with in the gospels. We assume that parallels exist between the situation in the text and the situation in the parish, but the text shows us plainly what really matters and is not up for grabs, while parishioners are often reluctant to do that. If we are to apply the text, we must find that with which it corresponds. That means listening and listening of a special sort—the kind the psychiatrist Theodore Reik referred to as "listening with the third ear."

One of the reasons for beginning sermon preparation on Monday is to have several days in which the themes of the gospel are running around in your mind. While part of your mind is turning them over and over, another part is also reflecting on all the problems (and joys) of parishioners. If both of those things are going on simultaneously, then the time will come when the two parts of your mind will start speaking to each other. One will say, "Hey, what you have been thinking about is the same thing that I have been thinking about." When that happens, a sermon is on the way. This validates the point made by Bonhoeffer: "We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God" (quoted in Chartier, *Preaching as Communication*, p. 44).

3. *Ask why this pericope was appointed for this particular feast in the calendar and how both are related to the total mystery of Christ.*

The relation between the liturgical season and the liturgy of the word is very well spelled out in the Introduction to the 1982 revision of the Lectionary:

The purpose of the homily at Mass is that the spoken word of God and the liturgy of the eucharist may together become “a proclamation of God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, the mystery of Christ.” Through the readings and homily Christ’s pascal mystery is proclaimed; through the sacrifice of the Mass it becomes present. (24).

The Introduction goes on to point out that “Christ himself is also always present and active in the preaching of his Church.” The point here, though, is that the event commemorated in the Sunday’s gospel is not one among many that are episodically and atomistically unrelated to one another. Rather, as the form critics have pointed out, each of the individual pericopes of the gospel is the entire gospel in a nutshell. If the implications of any of these stories is thought through thoroughly, it will be seen that the claims made about Christ are ultimate so that an adequate basis for faith would exist if one knew only that story.

Yet the stories are spread through the calendar to make up the Christian year. In this way the total mystery of Christ is celebrated in the course of the year, but it is also true that the whole gospel is celebrated each Sunday and whenever the sacrifice of the Mass is offered. The entire gospel is implied as much by the accounts of Christ’s humiliations during Lent as by the accounts of his triumphs during Epiphany, or even Easter itself. Thus week by week we hear proclaimed and see made present the total mystery of

Christ, but always in one particular, concrete manifestation.

The calendar, then, becomes a guidepost pointing to which aspect of the total mystery is to be sought in our particular gospel narrative. If we were to look at the story by itself, some other aspect of the total mystery could appear to us to be the most prominent one. The selection of that lection for its particular feast, though, provides the context in which we are to understand the lection. Thus we are not at the moment engaged in a rhapsody of liturgical theology but are instead engaged with a practical principle in applying a gospel pericope to the lives of the congregation. The calendar is an indication to us of the aspect of the pascal mystery to be proclaimed through the recounting of this week’s gospel.

4. *See what relevance this gospel has to issues before the church.*

The Introduction to the 1982 Lectionary revision goes on to say that the homily “must always lead the community of the faithful to celebrate the eucharist wholeheartedly ‘so that they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith.’” At a superficial level this could sound as though all that the homily is concerned with takes place at the church during the liturgy. Living eucharistically and living biblically are much more comprehensive undertakings than that. The wholehearted celebration of the liturgy in response to the proclamation of the Word enables the faithful to live out their faith in

every aspect of their daily activity. Their faith is not an isolated compartment of life that only gets opened during the liturgy. Rather, it is the principle that informs everything else that is done during all the week.

We have already seen, therefore, that preaching should deal with the issues that preoccupy Christians in their personal lives. It is also true that preaching is one of the means by which the faithful are helped to understand some of the questions that are being debated within the church. This is not to say that the body of Christ is to be polarized by polemics or that the church's magisterium is to be undercut. Rather, it is to say that Christian opinion on these issues must always be consistent with the gospel. Loyal Catholics hear authoritative spokespersons taking diametrically different positions on questions of faith and morals that have not been settled and they are confused about what faithfulness requires of them. There is no point in cataloging such issues because any list would be out of date before it could be published, but such issues do arise and the people of the church need perspective on them. This is not to say that each Sunday's homily should be the latest bulletin on some noisy controversy. Some homilies, however, should address such issues and each week the preacher should consider whether that Sunday's gospel offers badly needed perspective on an issue that is dividing the church.

5. Think of issues in the local community, the state, the nation, or the world to which this pericope speaks.

In addition to all of the specifically theological and moral issues debated within the church, Christians need also to know the implications of the gospel for the problems that beset our total society. Many such problems that the world at large does not address from moral or theological perspectives will inevitably be viewed from that angle by Christians. It is inappropriate, of course, to engage in partisan politics from the pulpit, but, on the other hand, an issue does not cease to be moral just because people vote on it. In running over in their minds the possible areas of application for the Sunday gospel; then, preachers should not neglect issues in the local community, the state, the nation, and the world.

6. Decide which area of application—personal, liturgical, parochial, theological, ethical, social, or political—is most urgent.

So far in our thinking about the application of the gospel to the life of the congregation all we have done is to list the various areas of life to which the gospel can be applied. Implicit to this has been a claim that all of these areas are not only legitimate areas for preaching but are in fact areas to which the homily must extend on occasion to be an adequate response to the gospel. Thus the question is not whether the homily should ever deal with such matters but only what it should deal with that week. To try to do all or even a few such applications in a single homily would be to make unfair demands on the congregation and also to risk incoherence through superficiality. So a choice must be made.

Which shall it be? There are two main considerations in making a decision. One has to do with the congruence of the application to the gospel that is being applied. A given gospel is just going to fit better with some areas of application than others and one does not try to make the word of God jump through hoops. The other consideration, though, is what that particular congregation needs to hear about most urgently. Sometimes a particular area of application will have to be chosen because it is so much in the forefront of everyone's thoughts. To speak of something else when they want to know what to think about that is irresponsible. At other times, though, an area of application will be urgent precisely because no one is thinking about it and they ought to be thinking about it. At any rate, a choice has to be made between the dozens of options and the homilist will decide to make one application rather than any of the other possible ones. The worst sort of homily is that which imitates Don Quixote's horse and "gallops madly off in all directions."

7. Determine what perspective this proclamation casts on the situation to which it is to be applied.

We need to speak a little more clearly of the process that was taking place when each of the areas of application was being considered. It was essentially a process of free association. It was described a little at the end of the second rule in this chapter, where one part of the mind was thinking about the meaning of the gospel and another part was thinking about personal concerns of parishioners. The gospel would not

serve equally well as an approach to all such problems; only certain ones would have something in common with the situation in the text. The same would be true of all the other areas of application as well. Only particular modern situations would be analogous to what was reported in the gospel and of those that were, some would be more analogous than others. This is the matter of congruence that was spoken of near the end of the discussion of the last rule.

It is this observation of a common principle operating between the situation in the text and the situation in the congregation that makes possible any application of a text to modern life. Because the situations are similar, the perspective taken on the situation in text by the sacred writer may be appropriately transferred to the modern situation. Now is the time to identify that perspective and transfer it to the area of application. This is the time to ask, "Now if this is what the biblical writer thought about a situation like this when it occurred in his time, what am I to think about such a situation when it comes up now?" Obviously you are to have the same basic attitude, but what does that attitude look like when it gets spelled out in terms of the contemporary situation? When you have answered that you will know pretty well the point that you will try to make in your homily.

IV. Developing the Idea

The previous chapter dealt with deciding to which aspect of Christian life today Sunday's gospel should be applied. In other words, the chapter dealt with deciding what to preach about. This chapter concerns what to say about the chosen topic. Many of the old manuals in homiletics distinguish between expository sermons and topical ones. Expository sermons take a passage of scripture and expound it. Topical sermons choose a subject and discuss it. The technique advocated in these pages is a combination of the two. It assumes that a Sunday homily will always be based on the gospel for the day, but its aim will not be limited to explaining what that passage means. Rather, as the last chapter indicated, the perspective of that gospel passage is to be applied to one aspect of Christian living today, which brings a topical dimension to homilies thus preached. But even here the idea is not just to analyze a subject such as sin, grace, forgiveness, the resurrection—or, for that matter, Andrew Greeley's novels or world hunger. As our definition of homily said, its purpose is to move members of the congregation to accept the point of doctrine drawn from the gospel and to act on the basis of it. A homily, then, can never be just the exposition of a subject. It is always a call for decision and action.

Since the purpose of the homily is not just to inform the faithful about a subject, but is to lead them to insight, conviction, and action, the hardest part of writing a homily is deciding what point you are going to make for which you wish to solicit agreement and consistent behavior. There is an old cliché that distinguishes between sermons that have something to say and those that have to say something. Obviously the first kind are the only ones worth preaching. But how do you move from your exegesis of the gospel and choice of an area of application to an idea of what to say?

Another way of asking the question is: where do inspirations for homilies come from? Ultimately, of course, the answer is theological: they come from the Holy Spirit. But how do you get him to deliver on time? The question is not asked irreverently, but it can be very urgent for the homilist who knows that preparation time is running out and that he or she has nothing worth saying.

It does not take much thought to realize that inspiration for a homily has much in common with the inspiration of artists. Homilies are, among other things, an art form. In both cases (homilies and other works of art), the ideas seem just to come, to rise into consciousness. This is really to say that they are formed (at least from a human point of view) in the unconscious mind and delivered into our conscious thought later. What follows, then, are techniques for wooing a muse, for setting the unconscious to work and for persuading it to part with its accom-

plishments. Techniques for this vary considerably and each homilist will have to discover his or her own most fruitful ones. Most of those listed below have been suggested by other writers in the field of homiletics. The main thing I could add personally to their methods is: "When all else fails, take a shower!" That, at any rate, is how many of my own best ideas come.

1. *Think before you write.*

This is the homiletical equivalent to the card one has seen posted over telephones: "Make sure the brain is engaged before the tongue is set in motion." The point is not that a fully written out manuscript should be prepared for every homily. Some preachers achieve better results with one and others without. There are also many stages in between the two extremes using outlines, notes, or what have you. This is rather to say that you need to know the overall structure and sequence of what you wish to say before you try saying it. Some homilists use writing as a warming up exercise to get them started thinking, but they should discard the results of this and only impose on the congregation what they have thoroughly thought through.

2. *Let the idea percolate, incubate, and distill.*

If ideas are developed in the unconscious, they have to have an opportunity to develop. This is another reason for starting preparation for Sunday's sermon no later than the preceding Monday. After the unconscious has the fruits of one's exegesis fed into it and

the basic decision about the area of application, it can mull over these while the conscious mind (with body attached) goes about a thousand other tasks. It operates much as the kingdom of God does in the parable told in Mark 4:26-29:

The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how. The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.

Eugene Lowry calls this phase of sermon preparation "wandering thoughtfulness" (*The Homiletical Plot*, p. 17). My understanding of why my best ideas come to me while showering is that they were actually developed by the unconscious while I slept and the relaxed time of the shower gives them an opportunity to rise effortlessly into consciousness. Any student who has ever struggled to solve a math problem until late at night and finally gone to bed in frustration only to wake up the next morning knowing the answer has experienced the same phenomenon. One of the best ways to get ideas to cook is to set them on one of the back burners of the mind.

3. *Ask yourself questions about the issue.*

Sometimes the unconscious needs a little prodding. One way of going about that is to ask questions, all kinds of questions that help you to look at an issue from a number of different perspectives. This method

is easier to illustrate than it is to describe and an excellent example has been given in H. Grady Davis' analysis of John 8:31-36, in which Jesus has told his audience that the truth will make them free and they take offense because as children of Abraham they have never been slaves:

What is Jesus talking about? He mentions *freedom* and he mentions *bondage*. What does he mean? Bondage to, freedom from what? Is it political? Is it social? Is it intellectual? If not, what bondage and what freedom is Jesus talking about?

He mentions *truth* and *knowledge* of the truth. What is this truth? What is this knowledge of the truth? Is it knowledge of scientific facts? Is it a correct philosophy of life? Is it a truth about history and culture? If not, what is the truth Jesus is talking about? What does he mean by knowing the truth?

What does Jesus actually say? He says, "the truth will make you free." But he also says, "if the Son makes you free." Does he mean that these are two different ways to freedom? If not, what does Jesus mean? (*Design for Preaching*, p. 52).

This is only about half of the questions that Davis asked of this one passage and he was preparing an old fashioned expository sermon instead of the sort of liturgical homily with which we are concerned, but he does show how questions can be used to stimulate thinking.

4. *Look at each character in the pericope and ask what aspect of your own personality is like the role of that character in this story.*

This technique is borrowed from a method of group meditation on biblical passages that was developed by Professor Walter Wink. After the members of the group have done their historical-critical homework on the exegesis of the passage, they begin to look at each character in the story and ask what motivates that character. Notice that, on the one hand, this is not like traditional techniques of meditation that try to reconstruct an event imaginatively by identifying with the point of view of one character in the story. Nor, on the other hand, is this a psychologizing interpretation that guesses at what emotions lay behind the action of an individual. Rather, this technique depends on clearly stated roles, such as those of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable. Jesus' portrait of the two has left little doubt about where they stand. But this technique goes on to ask, "What in my personality is like the Pharisee?" and "What part of me behaves like a tax collector?" The inspiration for this method came from Jungian dream analysis, which assumes that all of the characters in one's dream represent aspects of the dreamer's personality. What makes this process so useful for homilists is that it begins with a correspondence between the situation in the text and the situation in the congregation. It already constructs, then, the hermeneutical arch on which the homily rests.

5. *Think of four or five persons who will hear the homily and ask what good news the passage implies for them.*

Another way of beginning to move from the exegeted gospel and the chosen area of application to the thesis that will be annunciated or the question that will be faced in the homily is to visualize several members of the congregation who are likely to be present when the homily is preached. Do not think of abstract types but do choose individuals who represent the groups who make up the parish. Margaret Sullivan may be a working wife and mother who sings in the choir, likes informal liturgy, and wonders how she can meet all her other obligations and conform to the church's official teaching about marriage and the family. Tom Giordano, who helps administer the sacrament, is in investments and has distinct reservations about the activities of some priests and religious in Latin American countries. Pete Rabenhorst is the best center on any basketball team in the parochial school league, lives in a high rise housing project that has a higher crime rate than some small cities, and thinks God is calling him to the priesthood. Mary Kowalski is lucky enough to be able to afford servants to care for her and even has a chauffeur who can drive her to Mass, but her memory cuts in and out and she is never sure whether she has taken her medicine, eaten her meal, or already told you that. When the proclamation of today's gospel has its implications worked out for each of them in the chosen area of application, what does it look like? (This technique owes some of its inspiration to an essay by Morris J. Niedenthal.)

6. *Remember that a homily is not just about a thought, but about a thought that makes a difference.*

As ideas began to flow, we need criteria to decide which ones may be worth keeping. "What difference does it make?" is a question that applies one of the most relevant criteria. It is not enough for the content of a homily to be orthodox or even to be interesting. You need to know that people will be better off for having heard it, better off in significant ways. The leader of the Methodist revival, John Wesley, gave the advice: "Preach as a dying man to dying men." This perspective came in part from his conviction that those converted would escape a burning hell that all may not feel so strongly, but there should be urgency about all preaching. It is achieved in part by asking of every thesis for a homily that you consider: "So what?" Will it give your hearers new insight into what it means to be a Catholic Christian? Will they participate more fully in the liturgy because they have heard this? Will they be challenged to live more confidently because of God's promise? Will their consciences be sensitized to another dimension of living out the implications of the gospel? One thing is certain: if the homilist does not think the homily is important, it is certain that no one else will.

7. *Look for a sense of discrepancy or ambiguity in the gospel, a feeling that something is unresolved—a "bind."*

This rule has much in common with rule no. 6 in chapter II: "Note any striking, unexpected narrative details, paying special attention to what is most dif-

difficult to understand or accept." That rule, however, had to do with initial reactions to the pericope appointed for Sunday's gospel, while this principle is employed after you have already decided what you are going to preach about and are now wondering what you are going to say about it, how you are going to approach it, what handle will allow you to take hold of it. In the discussion of the earlier rule William Skudlarek was cited as one who thinks that the hard parts of the gospel to understand are those which offer most promise for preaching. A similar point of view is held by Eugene L. Lowry, whose description of what it is like to get an idea for a sermon conforms most closely to my own experience of the birth of such ideas. He would have sympathized with the intentions of a Scottish preacher of whom I once heard. Old-fashioned Calvinist congregations in Scotland were reputed to be so well informed theologically that they only needed to stay awake for the first five minutes of the long and learned discourses they had come to expect from the pulpit. By then they would have ascertained if the minister was "sound" or not and could doze off with the assumption that what remained to be said was predestined. One pastor tried to shock his congregation into staying awake by beginning his sermon in this way: "I take my text from 1 John (the Scottish pronunciation would be "one John"): 'God is love.' It's a damned lie!" At this everyone in the kirk sat bolt upright. Such a beginning could not be sustained, however. The preacher went on to say: "But stay. Per-r-r-adventure we ha' been a bit hasty in our joodgment."

The point is that a very plausible case can be made for treating the statement that God is love as a damned lie. His chosen people, for instance, who lost half their number—some six million human beings—in the holocaust, Hitler's "final solution of the Jewish problem," have excellent reason to question the thesis. The inhabitants of the southern hemisphere of our planet, most of whom live near the Plimsoll line of the subsistence level, may also raise understandable questions about the self-evident status of the affirmation. Even St. Teresa is supposed to have said to God, "If this is the way that you treat your servants, it is no wonder that you have so few."

While the tactics of the Scottish preacher are not to be recommended, a more prudent use of such discrepancies between the claims made by the gospel and ordinary human experience can do much to lead a congregation into considering an issue at a far more profound and personal level than they ever have before. We feel some ambiguity when we listen closely to the extraordinary claims we make. We feel that ambiguity as a sort of "itch" about the human condition. We either come to see how the gospel offers a "scratch" for that itch or we end in despair. Anyone who is not confident that ultimately the gospel can make sense of the whole human predicament has no good news to proclaim.

Chicago *Tribune* columnist Bill Granger was infuriated by a statement by the editor of *Chicago* magazine to the effect that newspapers should be more fun. He observed sarcastically that

John Fink (the editor) has a point. While the newspapers in town load up their pages with horrible stories about the threat of nuclear war, the collapse of public housing, the horror of the schools, the death rattle of the (Chicago Transit Authority), crime and taxes and all sorts of things that are . . . well . . . down, *Chicago* magazine is fun (4/6/82).

We live in a world in which all of these un-fun things are aspects of our existence and we are not entitled to faith and hope that do not take these into consideration.

This, however, is just one example of the sense of discrepancy that can be felt. When such feelings arise, they also bring a rising sense of excitement to a preacher who begins to feel: "Now I'm on to something. There might be a homily in this."

8. *Seek out the issues that concern the deep memory rather than the surface memory.*

This is the point at which we need to consider the quotation from Urban T. Holmes that was made in the Foreword:

The sermon or homily . . . has as its object the in-scape of existence, not the landscape. Preaching is not teaching. As an act of evangelizing the deep memory, it needs to reveal to us the inner person, not describe the externals.

Most of what is to be said in this relatively long comment on a rule is to be an exegesis of that statement. Probably nothing else in this book is so important to understand.

What I want to correct here is an essentially intellectual view of the transformation in orientation at which preaching aims. This view, which I have advocated myself in the past, assumes that what needs to be changed through preaching are concepts, ideas. A sophisticated form of this theory can draw on modern learning theory and the sociology of knowledge. It recognizes that all organisms, especially human beings, receive far more sensations than they can possibly process. The result is a sensory overload that forces us to develop sorting mechanisms that determine which sensations are important enough to rise to the level of consciousness. Implicit to the existence of such a mechanism is a definition of importance—which, in effect, is a view of the universe, a rudimentary metaphysic. That view, which can be called our "fundamental thinking," is, in effect, our sanity and thus we have deep emotional investment in its maintenance. New data we receive is either consistent with that fundamental thinking and is thus assimilated to it, or is inconsistent with it and challenges it. When the mass of the inconsistent data becomes critical and the challenge is successful, our fundamental thinking has to accommodate the new data. In this view, the target of preaching is fundamental thinking. Preaching seeks either to reinforce or to alter fundamental thinking. This fundamental thinking, though, functions at the level of concepts and is thus what Holmes refers to as the landscape of existence, the externals.

He also refers to fundamental thinking as the surface structure of meaning and contrasts that to the deep

structure of meaning. By that he means something like what Freud called the subconscious and Jung the unconscious mind. A basic axiom of psychoanalysis is that persons with emotional patterns they wish to change but cannot change experience that inability because they assume that the change can be effected at the intellectual level of concepts, when in reality the problem lies much deeper in the part of the mind that has a metaphoric rather than a conceptual structure.

Ultimately, humanity's interpretation of the forces of good and evil within its world and of the action required for survival and growth stems from this deep structure (Holmes, *Turning to Christ*, pp. 71f.).

This deep memory is the home of our dreams and of the symbols and myths that make up primitive religion. It is the world with which much in modern art and literature is concerned. It is the level at which depth psychology attempts to effect therapy. The content of this metaphorical world is suggested to us by a number of clues: the person we fall in love with, the things we laugh about or cry over, the fears that haunt us in the night, and the folk tales and fairy stories that have been passed down by many cultures. This is the inscape of existence, the inner person, that Holmes tells us must be evangelized.

This means that the strategy of the homily cannot just be arguments, although logic has its role to play. Rather, since the things to be changed are the basic metaphors by which the psyche interprets reality, the

tools to be employed are other, more adequate metaphors and stories. For the Christian these come from the Bible. As Holmes says it, "repentance is a change or expansion at the level of the deep memory. The truth that is Christ engages our deep memory. He becomes the dominant metaphor" (p. 74).

This takes us back to our definition of homily as a sermon that applies a point of doctrine drawn from that day's gospel to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.

Preaching is a doubly narrative medium because, on the one hand, it is based on a gospel narrative and, on the other, because it uses narrative analogies to persuade.

Not surprisingly, Jesus was the most effective preacher who ever lived and his most distinctive homiletical technique was the use of parables. While parables are first and foremost narrative analogies, they function powerfully as arguments, as Eta Linemann has demonstrated in her book, *Jesus of the Parables*. She says that most of Jesus' parables were addressed to his opponents and that in a parable he offered an analogy to the situation they were discussing. To win their acceptance of the analogy, he would make an initial concession to their point of view, as, e.g., in the Prodigal Son, he admitted that the boy deserved everything he got. By this initial

concession, his point of view became “interlocked” with that of his opponents. Then he could invite them to come around and view the same situation from another point of view, that of God. By forcing them to do that, he forced them to come to a decision between the point of view they had previously held and the new one that he held before them. By aiming to alter the metaphors of their deep memory, he tried to convert them.

From this we learn that a homily is not an essay, it is not an analysis, it is not a debate. Good preaching is always essentially narrative and it aims to influence the deep memory of metaphors rather than the surface memory of concepts.

9. *Limit yourself to an idea that can be treated in the available time.*

We are still at the stage of developing the idea for the homily and this is one last criterion by which to decide whether a particular idea is worth further development or should be discarded. Some points take a lot more time to communicate than others. Sometimes it is a matter of background information that people need in order to understand what is being said, sometimes it is a matter of the complexity of the concept itself, and other times it will be necessary to overcome a lot of resistance on the part of the congregation to the point of view that is to be inculcated. This means that the homily, like any other medium of communication, can convey some things better than others.

Sometimes when I am on the lecture circuit I make the rather feeble joke that I am a professor and professors are accustomed to thinking in fifty-minute units. A homily is also a unit with a given time span—ideally ten to fifteen minutes. The sermons of many famous Protestant preachers in the earlier part of this century were twenty-five to thirty-five minutes long, and in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sermons that lasted several hours were not unusual.

Whenever a particular idea is being considered we need to ask whether the presentation of that idea adequately takes more time than will be available. If so, it should be rejected because either people will be held longer than they expect and get fidgety or the idea will be presented in such a truncated or allusive fashion that no one will know what we are talking about. Of course, it is also possible to have an idea that takes less development than we have time for. If we decide to go ahead with it anyway, then temptations to pad should be resisted with all the moral fiber that sacramental grace and the prayers of the saints have given us. An old formula for success in public speaking is: “Stand up, speak up, shut up, and sit down.” Still, there is the possibility that the congregation will not feel like children who have been let out of school early, but will really have a sense that they have been shortchanged because they had a right to expect something more. A good idea for a homily, then, will be an idea that can be developed adequately in just the amount of time that is usually available.